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Forms of Pilgrimage at the Shrine of Khāled Nabi, Northeastern Iran

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Pilgrimage (religious tourism) is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism. Nevertheless, there is still a gap between abstract theory and empirical research about this form of tourism in the literature. The dearth of studies is even more glaring in the field of *Ziyārat* or pilgrimage in Islam which in spite of its importance and wide extended practice has been mostly ignored in tourism and geographic literature. The present study features one such example that is (almost) unknown within the community of tourism and geography researchers. In Iran, religious pilgrimage has a long tradition. Numerous sacred places with various rituals and traditions, practiced by pilgrims all around the country, indicate its antiquity (before the Islamic periods). Among the most practiced forms of religious pilgrimage are visits to several thousand shrines, which are known in Iran as *Ziyāratgah* (lit. place of visit) or *Imāmzādeh*. One of these *Ziyāratgah* is the pre-Islamic shrine of Khāled Nabi (also known as *Halat Nabi*), linked to a legendary Christian holy man from the 6th century AD. The shrine lies in the northeastern Iranian province of Golestan, in a region called Turkmen-Sahra. Despite its relatively remote setting, every year more than 90,000 travellers visit this shrine. This paper considers the variety of pilgrimage forms at the shrine and shows that the travellers to Khāled Nabi shrine are not homogenous and comprise different types of visitors. In addition to secular motivations, based on the visitors' curiosity, three forms of pilgrimage, namely, 'religious pilgrims', 'cultural pilgrims' and 'nostalgic pilgrims' have been identified.

Key words: forms of pilgrimage, ziyārat, imamzadeh, Khāled Nabi, Turkmen Sahra, Iran

Introduction

Worldwide, national and international religious and spiritual travel in the form of pilgrimage and religious tourism is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism (WTO, 2011; Olsen and Timothy, 2006; Rinschede and Bhardwaj, 1988). Since the early days of human history a multitude of sacred places around the world like shrines, temples, churches, landscape features, religious festivals and so on, have prompted hundreds of millions of pilgrims to visit. Worldwide, numerous cities have been founded and developed because of pilgrimage and religious tourism. In spite of huge changes in modern society, religious motivated travels are still an essential fixture in various religious cultures and are even finding a renaissance in the world and Europe (Sommer, 2012). Accordingly, in Europe alone, there are more than 6000 Christian pilgrimage sites which in total attract 60 to 70 million pilgrims every year (Antz, 2012).

Despite its importance, literature comparing studies about religious pilgrimage to other forms of tourism, and its connection to recreational (secular) tourism, have been relatively overlooked. This lack of pilgrimage studies in tourism and geographic literature is even more extreme in relation to *Ziyārat* or shrine pilgrimage in the Islamic contexts, in spite of its significance and extensive practice which have been mostly ignored.

In contrast to the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) which is considered as the 'official' or 'normative' form of pilgrimage in Islam, *Ziyārat* have been considered as the 'popular' (i.e. *völkisch*) form of pilgrimage, which is full of local cultural aspects and practiced in different forms among people from different cultures. Therefore, there is a close connection between *Ziyārat* and (cultural) tourism.

In Iran, religious pilgrimage (*Ziyārat*) has a long tradition. Numerous often pre-Islamic sacred places in the country indicate its antiquity and its importance in the life of Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Moslem Iranians. In recent decades, especially after the 1979 revolution, the importance of pilgrimage found its pinnacle, since people have been encouraged to do pilgrimage to holy shrines. Accordingly, several shrines and holy places have been restored or developed by the government and people. Some of these holy places, in addition to attracting varieties of pilgrims, also attract cultural tourists on account of their antiquity. Among the most practiced forms of religious pilgrimage are visits to several thousand Islamic shrines^[1], which are known in Iran as *Ziyāratgah* (lit. place of visit) or *Imāmzādeh*.

In addition to important Shia' shrines in the cities of Qom, Mashhad and Shiraz, there are some shrines in Iran which are overwhelmingly visited by Sunni Moslems. The shrine of Khāled Nabi is one of those which, during the past three decades has developed from an unknown isolated shrine to a weekly venue of assembly, especially for the Turkmen community which is one of Iran's lesser known minorities. According to the available literature, the shrine belongs to a putative Christian missionary from the 6th Century. The popularity of Khāled Nabi among the Turkmens has attracted the attention of curious Iranians (domestic and from abroad) and a small number of foreign tourists. Accordingly, despite its relatively remote setting, every year more than 90,000 travellers visit this site.

The main objective of this article is to consider the different tourism functions of the site of Khāled Nabi, as one of the most popular historical shrine in the north east of Iran. Accordingly, in the theoretical part, after reviewing the available literature about tourism and pilgrimage, their connections will be discussed. We seek to shed more light on the possibilities of categorizing visitors to Khāled Nabi shrine, according to their motivation.

Research Methodology

Because of the multidisciplinary characters of pilgrimage and tourism (as noted by Bieger, 2006 also by Schmude and Namberger, 2010), for the collection of data for this research, the author has relied on several traditional qualitative and qualitative methods, notably general observation, participant observation, in-depth interviews with key persons and distributing questionnaires among the visitors. To provide insight into the general opinions of visitors, a total of 180 questionnaires that contained open-ended and closed questions were distributed among Turkmen and non-Turkmen pilgrims/visitors in the age group of 18-80, of which 100 were completed.^[2] Data were coded and entered into SPSS. Field work was carried out from April to June 2011 and also in August 2011. Since the number of visitors vary throughout the week, to obtain the best results, the investigation was conducted across a whole week to include periods with maximum, average, and minimum number of visitors.

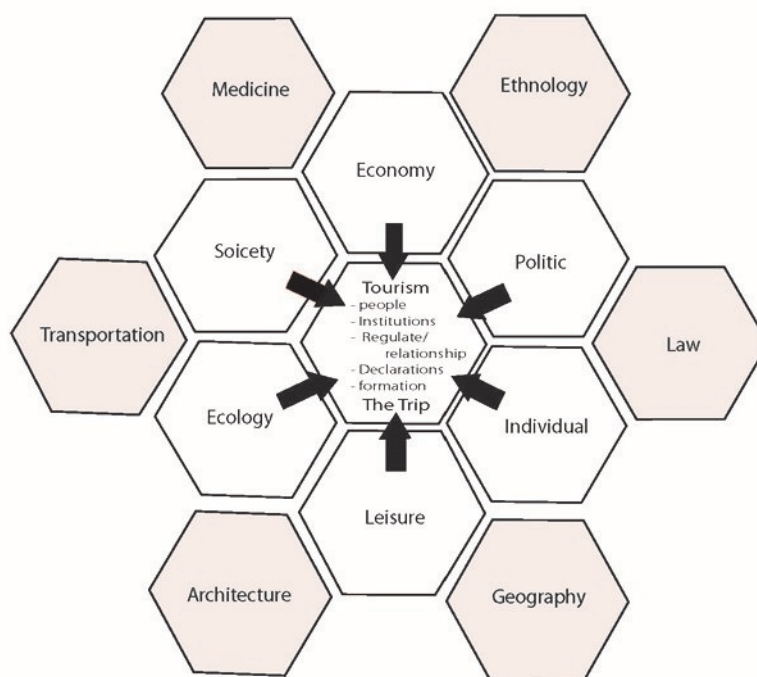
From Religious Pilgrimage to Secular Tourism

The definition of pilgrimage and tourism and their connections have been discussed extensively in the tourism literature.

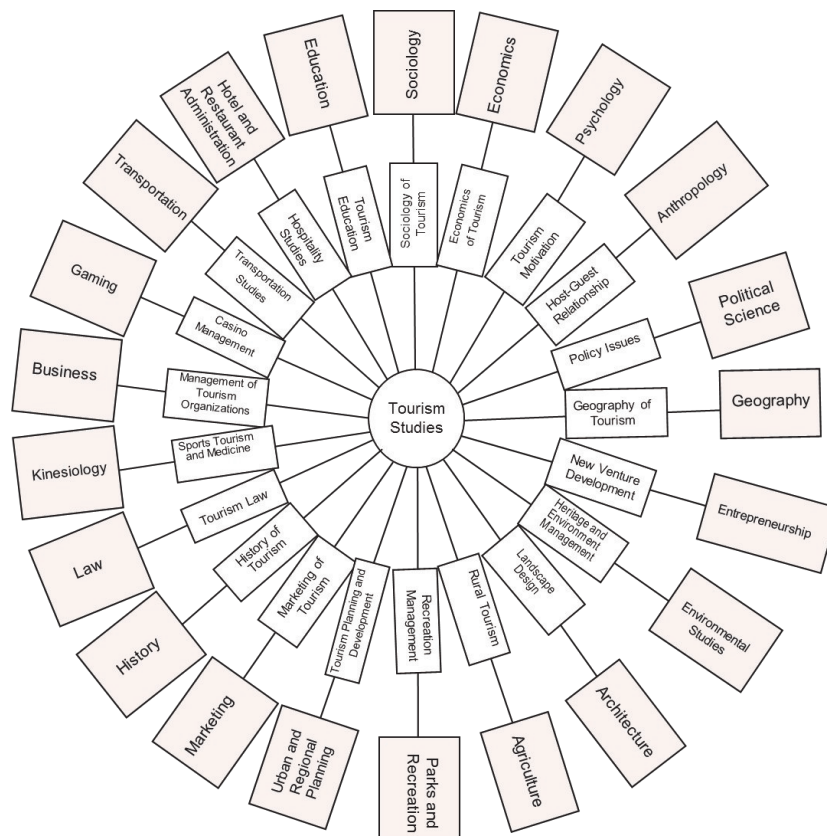
The term 'tourism' is considered to be a challenging multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field of study by most accounts. Researchers working in disciplines as varied as geography, anthropology, economics, marketing, sociology, history, theology, psychology, political studies, law, environment and so on, have tried to define and explain the precise nature of this activity. One may subscribe to the observation of two prominent experts in the field of tourism research, (Smith, 2001; Murphy, 1985) who indicate: 'there are as many definitions of tourism as there are disciplines and investigations' (Smith, 2001, p.15) and 'there are as many types of tourist as there are motives for travel' (Murphy, 1985, p.5).

1 It is estimated that there are about 10,000-12,000 Imāmzādehs and holy shrines in the country, of which, less than 4000 are officially registered (Ayaz, 2012; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2011; Deutsche Welle, 2012; CHTN, 2012).

2 The questionnaire focused on the pilgrims' expression of beliefs, feelings, motivations, behavior, experience at the site and comprised closed-end and open-end questions. The first part of the questionnaire elicited the pilgrims' personal details and characteristics such as age, gender, origin, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation. The second part asked about their visit to the site - their motivations, activities, patterns of visit, behavior, length of stay etc.

Figure 1 : Holistic Model of Tourism

Source: Freyer (2011:47) original in German, translated by the author

Figure 2 : Model of Knowledge Productions in Tourism

Source: Originally proposed by Jafari (1981) cited in Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009

The difficulty of finding the appropriate and all-encompassing definition for 'tourism' is certainly reflected in the many, sometimes contradictory opinions within the scholarly community on this often, poorly understood phenomenon. According to Williams (2009), the problem of defining tourism arises, since a single term should designate varieties of meanings [interpretations] which include an area of study in a range of disciplines. Some scholars like Freyer (2011) and Jafari (1981), have tried to define tourism by introducing holistic models which indicate the area study of tourism, Figures 1 & 2.

Like tourism, the multifaceted phenomenon of pilgrimage is frequently mentioned in the sphere of travel. Its interdisciplinary character has engendered a lively debate among scholars, who have used several approaches to capture *pilgrimage* in a few clear-cut and generally valid definitions. It is agreed generally that 'traditional' pilgrimage is a journey inspired by spiritual or religious reasons to a 'hallowed place' that could consist of:

- a. Elements of the natural and geographical environment such as mountains, rivers, springs, trees, caves, lakes, islands, groves or even animals.
- b. Religious edifices such as churches, cathedrals, mosques, sites of revelations or the activities of the religious founders, temples, synagogue or shrines.
- c. General venue for religious and spiritual activities, ritual or festivals (Cohen, 2000:438, 2006; Hosta and Limon, 2009; Davidson *et al.*, 1990; Morinis, 1992 and Shackley, 2006)

Pilgrimage attractions comprise numerous forms of sites worldwide; ranging from small regional shrines to world-famous sanctuaries these attract millions of believers. The prominent German geographer, Rinschede (2000:37) describes religious attractions as follows:

[These] are places or events which are recognized by individuals or groups as worthy of devotion and visitation. As religious or sacred phenomena, they stand out from the profane and commonplace. They can be distinguished primarily by the intensity of the perceived holiness.

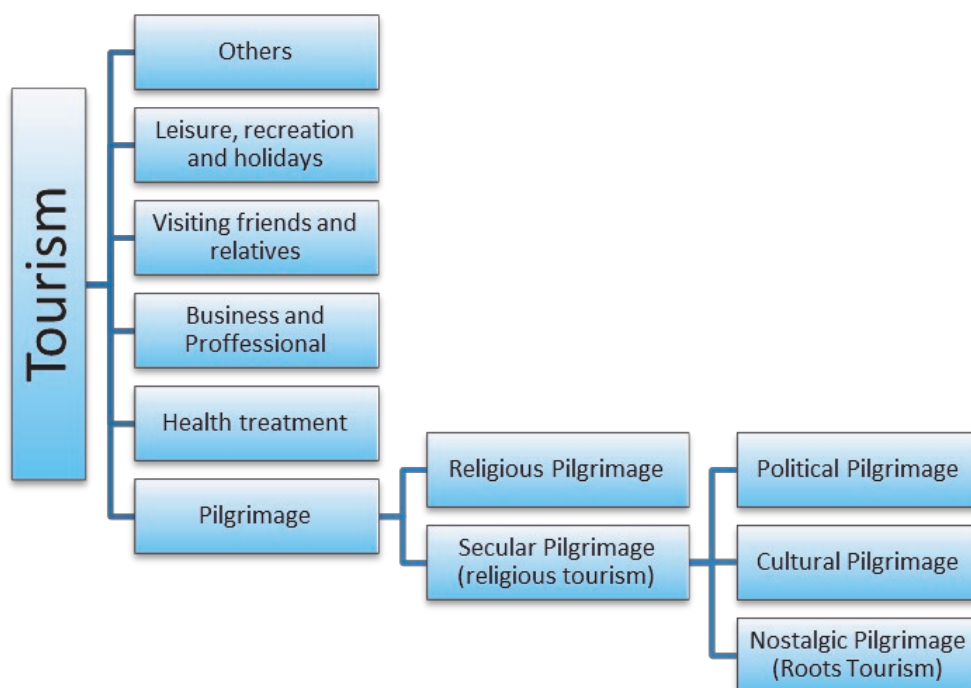
Forms of Pilgrimage

Contrary to the commonly held impression, not all visitors to religious sites are purely religious pilgrims - people with varieties of motives visit religious sites. In fact, pilgrimage is an activity which cuts across many human cultures and traditions. Several scholars have attempted to capture different features of religious travel. In their research about the motivations of Polish pilgrims, Jackowski and Smith (1992:93) suggest that although 'a pilgrimage has traditionally been described as a religiously motivated journey to a sacred place', it is actually possible to distinguish two forms of this, viz. a pilgrimage motivated (purely) by religion (or 'true pilgrimage' as they called it), and a pilgrimage motivated by knowledge. In the former category, the pilgrims, who are mostly poorly informed or blissfully unaware of the historical or cultural significance of the place, generally spend their time in meditation, prayer and performing religious rites. The latter category, the so-called *knowledge*-based pilgrims (or, according to the definition of the authors, 'religious tourists'), includes those pilgrims whose motivation for the journey is largely 'knowledge-based' and their primary pursuit is to have 'an experience with the [pilgrimage] route', on the basis of the information they have gathered from their surroundings, the countryside through which they pass and the people they meet.

Generally, as Eade and Sallnow (1991:3) have noted:

pilgrimage as an institution cannot actually be understood as a universal or homogeneous phenomenon but should instead be deconstructed into historically and culturally specific instances.

It appears therefore that it is possible to find a huge diversity in the field of pilgrimage. In fact, the concept of pilgrimage exists in all major religions but with various meanings depending on the religious structure. In other words, people from different cultural, geographical and socio-political milieus and background might have different perceptions of the meaning surrounding pilgrimage, for example in relation to issues such as *holiness*. A good example for this is the visits of Iranian people to the mausoleum of the famous Persian poet Hafez located in Shiraz (in the south of Iran). For Iranians, who have learned many of Hafez's ghazals by heart and have been immersed

Figure 3 : Forms of Pilgrimage in Tourism Studies

Source: adapted from World Tourism Organization

in their mystical meaning and spirit, such a visit acquires a very spiritual dimension that borders on a religious pilgrimage. At the same time, for many foreign tourists, who are not deeply familiar with Hafez's poetry, the journey is a mere stop-over in their itinerary and the tomb happens to be one of the more important attractions of Shiraz.

As indicated, the reasons to be on a pilgrimage are manifold. Although, the key motivation in pilgrimage is religion, in many cases other reasons which are similar to those for (secular) tourism also accompany it. In addition, not all religious phenomena that are venerated or visited by devout believers or tourists have equal status or perceived holiness. As pointed out by Blackwell (2009:33):

motivation, furthermore, can change when the individual switches activities, for example, from being a pilgrim to a tourist and vice-versa, often without the individual being aware of the change.

Pilgrimage vs. Religious Tourism

Because of the diversity of motivations involved, like tourism, the term 'pilgrimage' is still a general term which has been widely used both in sacred and secular contexts, therefore, based on the tourism definition of the UNWTO^[3], pilgrimage

can be classified as a subcategory of 'tourism'. Reviewing available pilgrimage literature^[4] indicates the use of the term *religious tourism* (instead of pilgrimage) by many scholars which has caused several ambiguities. Firstly, the term *tourism*, in most of these publications refers to recreational secular (non-religious) forms of activity, while in other important texts (such as the Encyclopaedia of Tourism or UNWTO's definition) tourism has been used as a general term which includes both religious and non-religious motivated travel. Secondly, 'religious tourism', being applied to both religious and semi-religious visitors is still a broad term. Due to the dearth of appropriate terms^[5], we shall classify the nature of the visits to sacred places (depending on the motivations of the visitors), in two main categories: 'religious' and 'secular' pilgrimage, see Figure 3.

Religious Pilgrimage

According to Figure 3, *religious pilgrimage* (also known as 'sacred' pilgrimage) is the pilgrimage performed by traditional believers who are concerned only with holiness and worship in reference to a higher or supernatural deity or being (s). 'Mystico-religious sites' are places which are mainly the destination of 'religious pilgrims.' In fact as Rinschede (2000:37) states:

[These sites] *are perceived* [by them] *as the most sacred, because they believe that God and man are brought into direct context through them.*

Typical examples include the pilgrimage undertaken by followers of Catholic Christianity to Lourdes or Fatima, the *hajj* to Mecca by Muslims and Hindu pilgrimage to the River Ganges. The expectations for such visits are usually to gain a blessing (or *baraka* in Arabic), a cure of illness, ailment, etc.

Secular Pilgrimage

Secular pilgrimage which is mostly classified by scholars as *religious tourism*, includes that group of visitors (pilgrims) who visit mostly sacred places and are motivated by religion *in combination* with other kinds of motivations, namely quasi-spiritual motivations. In fact, the changes in life style and strong secularization of modern life encourages many 'modern' pilgrims to travel for reasons rather than religious, like cultural, political, knowledge-seeking or simply a quest for one's roots and identity (religious, cultural, political or familial.) Secular pilgrimage in other words, fulfils both religious and recreational needs of the travellers.

Grasping the exact nature of 'secular pilgrimage' (religious tourism) has raised a series of debates among the scholars. Like other forms of tourism, drawing an exact line between different types of pilgrimage seems nearly impossible. However, we shall classify secular pilgrimage into three forms: cultural; political and; nostalgic pilgrimage.

Cultural Pilgrimage: There are many ancient religious and spiritual sites around the world that attract many visitors not because of their religious or sacred nature (in the traditional sense), but because of their remarkable cultural and historical heritage magnetisms. In other words, these places, which are mostly enlisted in UNESCO's List of World Heritage Sites, are known by their visitors due to their admirable architecture, appearance or historical importance, rather than their religious meanings. Sites include places such as shrines, synagogues, pagodas, monasteries, temples, caves, mountains, groves, sites associated with (persecuted) religious minorities or religious deviance, mosques, stupas, ancestral halls, pyramids, ashrams, lakes, islands, cemeteries and other burial places, towns and sites of violent conflicts, including battlefields (Stausberg, 2011; Sharpley, 2012).

Because of the close relationship between pilgrimage and cultural events, we label this group of travellers as 'cultural pilgrims'. Because of the close connection between 'culture' and 'religion' in pilgrimage, some scholars (like Digance, 2003) view pilgrimage as a 'cultural phenomenon' which historically connects people from diverse cultures and ethnic groups. In fact, cultural pilgrimage deals with the visits of cultural tourists, mostly out of curiosity about different cultures and religions, travel to religio-cultural festivals, historical sacred places or cultural figures. Accordingly, sites of religion worldwide can be assumed as sites of heritage. Da Graca Mougá Pocas Santos (2003: 38) describes these sort of pilgrims as those who might be interested in the 'meaning and symbolism of religious places, monuments and practices, and seeks to deepen [their] knowledge [about] these things.' She conceived that these visitors don't achieve the status of *pilgrim* or even *religious tourist*, since:

- 1) These visitors don't have any sense of the spirituality of these places,
- 2) They don't actively participate in religious acts which take place in these places.

Indeed, cultural pilgrims are mostly defined due to their knowledge-based motives (such as learning about the history and culture of a religious place) rather than purely religious or pleasure-seeking motivations.

Generally, because of the complexities of these motivations, in some cases, a religious site might

3 World Tourism Organization defined tourism as: 'the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, or other purposes.' (WTO, 1995) In fact, this definition is actually broad enough to include several forms of travel activities.

4 Several scholars such as (Blackwell, 2009:36; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2002:7; Blackwell, 2009:36; Hochgatterer, 1996:10; Stausberg, 2011: 6; Rinschede, 1999:197) classify religious pilgrimage (or as they call *religious tourism*) technically as a sub category of tourism activity.

5 There are many other terms referring pilgrimage in tourism literature like religious tourism, sacred journeys, sacred travels, spiritual journeys/travels, and so on.

fulfil numerous functions. But these roles can not only be determined from outside and they depend on the needs and purposes of the visitors. Accordingly, for example, a religious building can simultaneously perform two functions. It can firstly, satisfy the religious needs of the visitor (i.e. Gottesdienst) and secondly, it might comprise of a special attraction – like its unique architecture or wall paintings (Sommer, 2012)

Among the most popular cultural pilgrimage sites are the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Cologne Cathedral in Germany and many religious temples in Asia, which are visited by International tourists. Other sites that function as places of cultural pilgrimage are those related to famous literary figures such as the Persian and British poets Rumi and Shakespeare or artists like the American singer Elvis Presley, which elicit adoring sort of feelings during the visits of their adherents and disciples.

In addition, religious festivals might also classify as cultural pilgrimage. These feasts which have both cultural and religious rituals and traditions

are visited by both secular and religious tourists.

Political Pilgrimage: ‘Political pilgrimage’ as another form of secular pilgrimage, is related to travel (mostly motivated by governments) of people to countries, who wish to visit quasi-religious attractions and ceremonies (mostly funerals) related to national leaders, heroes or war victims or similar in order to pay respect - merely out of curiosity. People with different motivations (from strong emotion to simple curiosity) visit these places. Among popular political pilgrimage sites are the intact body of Lenin in Lenin’s Mausoleum in Moscow; Nelson Mandela’s prison on Robben Island, or the *ārāmgah* (resting place) of Imām Khomeini near Tehran.

Nostalgic Pilgrimage: Finally, ‘nostalgic pilgrimage’, also known as ‘roots tourism’ is another form of secular pilgrimage, in which the ‘pilgrim’ ‘quests’ to know more about their social, religious, cultural, national or ethnic identity, and thus, visit places which are presumed to have relations to their ancestors or their past. The search for identity is even stronger among the

Photo 1 : The shrine of Chupān Atā and *Kopet-Dāgh* mountains (‘thousand hills’) late summer 2011



Source: Author

Photo 2 : Historical graveyards near Khāled Nabi, 20.08.2011



Source: Author

religio-ethnic minorities. Basu (2004:173) defines nostalgic pilgrimage (which he called ‘roots-tourism’) as a metaphorical and terrestrial journey to home (homecoming), to the source and cradle of belonging. According to Sharpley and Sundaram (2005), nostalgic pilgrims are usually strongly motivated to connect with their history.

Regarding the motivations of ‘on foot’ pilgrims in Europe, Brämer (2012:57) links this to some sort of nostalgic motivations such as a ‘search for old values, simple life and partially seek for Christian symbols’. On occasions, this question of identity is more existential and philosophical, and inspires travellers to visit for relatively long periods of time, for what Basu sees as ‘a quasi-mystical finding of oneself in others and others in oneself’ (2004:168).

Forms of Pilgrimage at Khāled Nabi Shrine

Khāled Nabi Shrine – known also as *imāmzādeh-e Khāled Nabi* - is one of the most sacred and popular sacred shrines for Iranian Turkmens. This shrine complex is located on the southern flank of 712-m.-high Mt. *Gockche Dāgh* in the district of Maraveh Teppéh of the Turkmen Sahra. The summit is called *tangry daq* (Mount of God in Turkish) by Turkmen. *Gockche Dāgh* is surrounded by the low, hearther-clad hills of Kope

Dāgh, which are referred to by locals as the *hezar tappeh* (thousands hills). This stretch of hills are located between Iran and Turkmenistan (*Photo 1*). The area of Khāled Nabi consists of three major shrines of

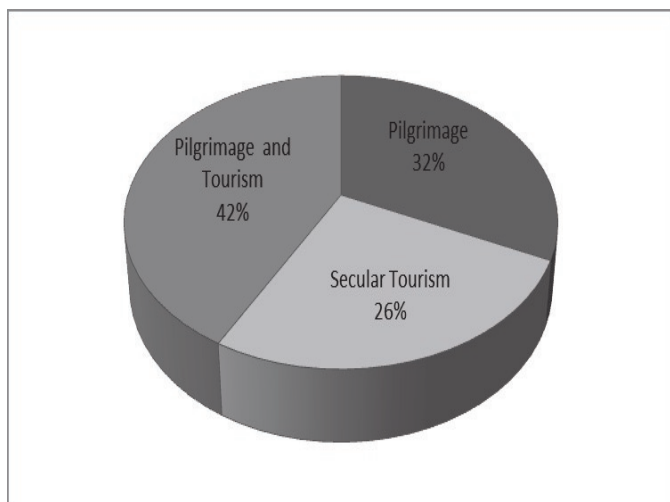
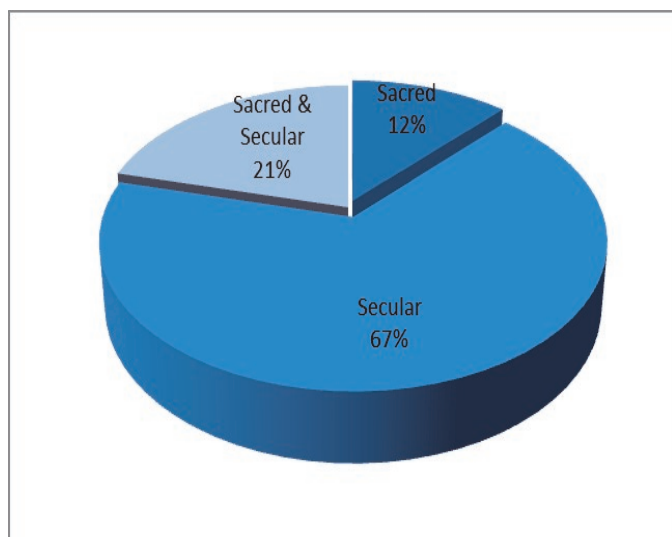
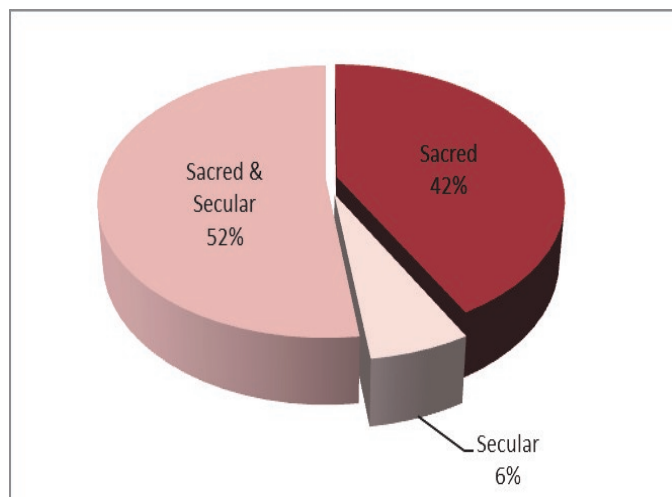
- Khalid ibn al-Sinan (simply known by locals as Khāled Nabi),
- *Chupān Atā* and
- *Alim Bābā*.

About 3 Km from the shrine of Khāled Nabi, a former burial mound is located (*Photo 2*). This graveyard is strewn with mostly phallic shaped gravestones, which appear to be of great (pre or early Islamic) antiquity (Stronach and Royce, 1981:147).

The history of pilgrimage to Khāled Nabi is generally unknown. It is unclear when the site began to act as a religious shrine especially for local Turkmens. There is no information about the time of construction of the shrines at the complex. As part of a PhD research project carried out by the author, it emerged that during the last 30 years, Khāled Nabi has been developed enormously and has started to generate public interest - establishing itself as an important regional shrine for Turkmens. Reviewing the demographic aspects of the visitors indicates that the visitors are

Map1 : Khāled Nabi & the province of Golestan



Figure 4 : Form of activities among all the visitors**Figure 5 : The primary purposes of visits among non-Turkmen travelers****Figure 6 : The primary purposes of visits among Turkmen travelers**

mainly male (85%); include more Sunni Turkmen (66%) than Shia non-Turkmen (34%); and are relatively young (65% of visitors are under 40 year old). Furthermore, the main purpose of 32% of visitors to the Khāled Nabi shrine is pilgrimage. A further 26% have recreational (non-religious) motivations and the remaining 42% are interested in both religious and recreational reasons (Figure 4).

Interestingly, the motivations for visit are different for Turkmen and non-Turkmen. As can be seen in Figures 5 & 6, 42% of Turkmen visited Khāled Nabi just for 'sacred' (pilgrimage) reasons and the majority of the remaining visitors (52%) visited for both 'sacred' and 'secular' motivations. Only 6% of Turkmen visited the site as 'secular' (non-religious) tourists.

In contrast, a minority (12%) of non-Turkmen visited the shrine for 'sacred' reasons, with 21% visiting for both 'sacred' and 'secular' motivations. But overall a clear majority (67%) visited Khāled Nabi for 'secular' (non-religious) reasons, see Figure 6.

In addition to its religious appeal, the sanctuary of Khāled Nabi offers several other forms of entertainment that are a draw for visitors with non-religious motivations. It is important to consider that these motivations are changing. Often, visitors may seek multiple experiences even on short trips and switch their motivations unconsciously as they visit a destination.

The Sacred-Secular Axis

In this research, to solve this problem of *simultaneous* and *overlapping* motivations, the classification of visitors is based on their *self-described* motivations derived from the questionnaire (Figure 7). Based on the visitor's motivation three forms of pilgrimage: 'religious', 'cultural' and, 'nostalgic' have been recognized at the site.

Religious Pilgrims:

These visitors are solely preoccupied with the holiness of Khāled Nabi. They visit the shrine out of religious belief and their main activity is praying. They come to Khāled Nabi specifically to ask for help and assistance in problems related to personal finance, health, and fertility or finding a suitable partner (for themselves or for their

children). The believers who have such a vow, tie coloured rags on the branches of a tree next to the shrine in order to have their wishes granted. Those who have their wish granted donate a small carpet to the shrine or sacrifice a lamb or calf, depending on the nature of their wish.

Cultural Pilgrims:

This category includes non-Turkmen visitors who believe in the holiness of the site, but unlike their Turkmen fellows, do not come to the site to make a vow; they are more interested in the spiritual atmosphere of the sanctuary. These visitors also show interest in the natural and historical attractions of the site.

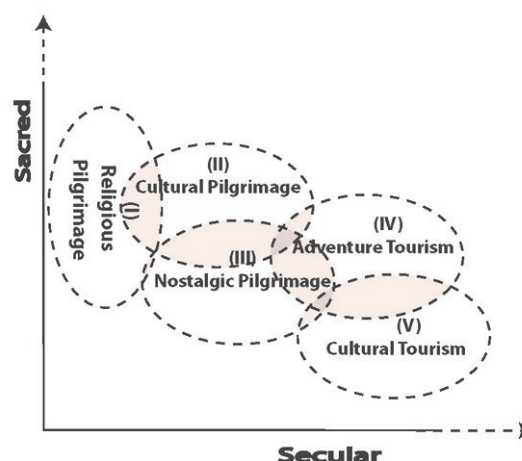
Nostalgic Pilgrims:

The last category includes 'nostalgic pilgrims' who are mostly motivated by religio-cultural reasons. They consist of young and middle-aged Turkmen in a middle or high income group, who, instead of being driven by (purely, mainly) religious motivations, are mostly interested in the historical and cultural aspects of the site. Among their motivations for visit, we encounter some concepts like:

- a visit to confirm their roots,
- satisfying nostalgic feelings about the good past-days,
- quest of identity,
- educational reasons,
- family togetherness or similar.

These Turkmen visitors, who usually have an academic educational background, visit Khāled Nabi in search of their cultural and religious identity. Simultaneously, they might be interested in nature as well. Because of the difficulties experienced by Turkmen in modern Iranian society, Khāled Nabi offers a chance for cultural unity through pilgrimage or the simple act of gathering together (without being under the constant scrutiny of the local authorities or other Iranian citizens). In fact, this category have transferred and copied their own central Asian ancestral values and customs to the site and have come to accept Khāled Nabi as their own original sacred place. According to pilgrimage classification, we shall classify them as nostalgic pilgrims.

Figure 7 The Sacred-Secular Axis of Different Forms of Activities at Khāled Nabi Shrine



Source: Author

Conclusion

Reviewing literature, nearly all scholars acknowledge the close relationship between leisure tourism and pilgrimage and admit that their connections have been blurred. In fact, religious sites, in addition to satisfying the religious needs of their religious pilgrims, provide various forms of leisure / entertainment for tourists.

Among more than 100 *Imāmzādeh* which are located in the Turkmen Sahara (*northeastern Iran*), the shrine of Khāled Nabi is the most well-known one, especially during the last three decades as it has developed from an unknown, remote place to the most important gathering centre for Turkmen. The shrine derives from a putative Christian Missioner from the 6th Century. Located in the Perso-Turkic cultural boarder line of Iran and Central Asia, the rituals that are held by Turkmen in Khāled Nabi are fairly unique in Iran and cannot obviously be connected with mainstream (Shia) Islamic practice.

The main findings of the current study included the investigation of different available forms of tourism and pilgrimage at Khāled Nabi shrine. Accordingly, in order to explain the *tourist* and/or *pilgrim* role(s) of the visitors and the possibility of classifying them, their demographic features (age, gender, social and economic situation), perceptions, motivations and behaviour were considered.

The results of the study show that, contrary to the prevailing view, visitors to the shrine of Khāled Nabi are not homogenous and comprise of different types of visitors. The geographical backdrop of the shrine with its beautiful natural scenery (especially in spring), an ancient burial ground, and the ethnic allure for the Turkmen, attracts a range of different visitors with different motivations. They come with religious motivation (32%), secular (recreational) motivation (26%) and semi religious incentives - both religious and recreational (42% of all visitors).

Generally, the visitors to Khāled Nabi can be classified into two common groups: Turkmen and non-Turkmen visitors. The Turkmen visitors who constitute the majority (65%) are mainly (42%) interested in religious pilgrimage or combine pilgrimage with other forms of tourism (52%). During the Islamic holidays, hundreds of Turkmen pilgrims arrive at Khāled Nabi to pray. Nonetheless, for some other Turkmen (4%), Khāled Nabi is just a place for meeting other fellow Turkmen, having picnics and spending a day with their families. Because of these characteristics, different rituals and activities in Khāled Nabi can be observed.

In contrast, the majority (58%) of the non-Turkmen travellers are curious Iranians (domestic and from abroad) and a few foreign tourists, who visit Khāled Nabi for secular reasons. Only 12% of the non-Turkmen visitors visit the shrine as religious pilgrims.

Based on the visitor's motivation three forms of pilgrimage: 'religious', 'cultural' and, 'nostalgic' have been recognized at the site. Religious pilgrims includes those visitors (mostly Turkmen) who out of religious belief visit the shrine and their main activity is praying. Cultural pilgrimage includes non-Turkmen visitors who believe in the holiness of the site (figures 6), unlike the Turkmen religious pilgrims, these non-Turkmen visitors do not come to the site to perform a religious ritual (e.g. making a vow). Nostalgic pilgrimage includes young and middle age Turkmen, who, instead of purely motivated by religion are interested in the historical and cultural aspects of the site. Among their motivations to visit, we encounter concepts such as: a visit to confirm their roots, satisfying nostalgic feeling about the good-past-days, quest of identity, educational reasons, family togetherness, or similar.

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